

1,
ce

ved

its

1946

THE CROWNS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

(A paper read before the Western Pennsylvania Numismatic Society,
December 3rd, 1946, by W. W. Woodside.)

The crown is now the largest denomination of British silver coinage, a fact which has led numismatists to apply the term "crown-sized" to coins of many countries and denominations, ranging in diameter from less than that of the U. S. dollar to one much greater than any actual crown. The term is officially used in the coinage of many countries, (and, of course, with a number of spellings), but all of these are of more recent origin -- where they continue in use -- than the British application of the name to the 5 shilling piece.

Names of coins could be separated into classes according to the derivation of the names, and "crown" is one of a large group whose names come from the devices they bear. Examples will come readily to mind -- crusado, kreuzer, ecu (shield), testoon, and so on. The earliest official use of the word seems to have been in reference to a gold coin of Louis IX of France, originating between 1226 and 1270 -- the couronne d'or. In later French reigns the common gold denomination was the ecu, and Charles VII (1422-1461) issued the ecu a la couronne, the name being derived from the crown which was now introduced over the shield of arms.

French coinage long exercised a remarkable influence on the mints of Scotland and England, due largely, of course, to the economic and occasionally political ties between countries. It is not surprising, therefore, that under Robert III (1390-1406) the Scots issued a coin of the same weight and fineness as the ecu a la couronne, bearing on the obverse a diamond-shaped shield like that of the "French crown", but with the Scottish lion replacing the fleur-de-lis. While the reverse legend was identical with that of the French coin, a figure of St. Andrew on his cross was substituted for the cross fleury. These coins, approximating the weight of the English noble, occur with both long and short crosses; late in the reign the weight was reduced to about that of a half-noble, and in this size the piece was issued through the reign of James IV, or for about a century; it is commonly called a lion, or St. Andrew.

The next development in the story of the crown was the appearance in France, about 1500, of a new denomination, the couronne du soleil, which was promptly imitated in England as well as in Scotland. In Scotland, James V issued in 1525 a gold 20 shilling coin called a crown; since this crown was struck at Holyrood Abbey, near Edinburgh, it received the name of "Abbey Crown". The denomination occurs again under Mary, during her first widowhood in 1542, but was not later repeated.

At almost the same time, the English issued a gold crown of identical size and fineness to the couronne du soleil. This was the Crown of the Rose, struck by Henry VIII from August to November of 1526, and having a face value of $4\frac{1}{2}$ shillings. Only two specimens have survived of this meager issue. In November, 1526, a new coin, The Crown of the Double Rose, with a face value of 5 shillings, was struck together with its half.

During the brief reign of Edward VI, gold crowns were continued, and for the first time there appeared the silver crown. This magnificent coin, showing the boy-king in armor and mounted, was struck in 1551, and barring a few gaps has continued to the present. The first of these interruptions came in the following reign of Mary, when crowns were entirely omitted from the gold and silver issues. Elizabeth, however, revived the gold crown, which was among the denominations of the first milled coinage, as well as the hammered money. In 1601 and 1602, at the very end of her rule, Elizabeth issued also silver crowns bearing her portrait. During this period there appeared also a crown in Scotland, dated 1561, and of different type than the Abbey Crowns. Of this coin of Mary Stuart there exists today no official record, and only one example.

The first English coinage of James I included a "Thistle Crown" of 4 shillings, and a "Britain Crown" of 5 shillings, both in gold, as well as the silver crown. While all of these occur with legends varying his titles before and after he was styled "King of Great Britain", the Thistle Crown was not issued after this reign.

Charles I continued the crown in gold, and those in silver were struck in Charles' name not only by the King, but by the Parliament after he had left London. The vicissitudes of the royal mint in this period are too complex for notice here; suffice it to say that the provincial mints at Exeter, Oxford, Shrewsbury and ~~London~~ ^{London} struck crowns in their issues, and the denomination occurs also among the siege coins of Scarborough. The great Nicholas Briot struck crowns of gold and silver at the Tower in this period, but no crown was among his coins struck later, at York. There exists also a famous pattern crown in silver, struck at Oxford by Thomas Bamage, which shows a panorama of Oxford as background for the mounted figure of the King. Under Charles I the crown appears for the first time as a denomination in the Irish money, being included in the necessity issues of Ormonde, Inchiquin, and Dublin money.

The Commonwealth coinage presents the anachronism of crowns of gold and silver being included in a non-royal coinage, and after this time the term "Britain Crown" seems not to have been used. The money of Cromwell, struck by Thomas Simon, presents the same denominations, but from this time on the gold 5 shillings is known as a quarter of the sovereign rather than as a crown; thus from here on, we shall consider the silver issues alone. The silver crowns are distinguished for a die-break across the lower obverse which is found on all but a few specimens. There exist also some purported crowns of Cromwell, made much later, and known as "Tanner's Crown" and "The Dutch Crown".

Shortly before Charles II was restored to the throne, he issued a silver crown in Ireland, the second appearance of the denomination in that island. With the inauguration of the milled coinage of 1660 there began a series of crowns of some variety, having variously a rose or an elephant (thought by some to be the first colonial coin) under the bust. These coins are the work of Jan Roettiers, but the outstanding piece of

the crown series, if not of the entire British coinage, is Thomas Simon's famous "Petition Crown", which is prized as much for the beauty of execution as for the remarkable legend which encircles its edge.

From this period on, the story of the crown is largely the story of the silver coinage of England, and for the most part the types are those generally struck. A few comments will suffice. Under James II, there were struck the "Gun Money" pieces in Ireland, the only crowns made entirely of base metal as a substitute for silver. Under William III, although coins were for the last time struck in provincial English mints, the crowns all had their origin in London. Anne issued silver coins at Edinburgh after the formal Union of the two Kingdoms, among them a crown having E below the bust, and these mark the end of a Scottish currency, except for a pattern piece of James VIII, the "Old Pretender". Indeed, this latter coin, dated 1716, was actually made in 1828 by one Matthew Young.

Crowns occur of the young and old portrait issues of George II, and of George III only in his last issue, 1817. No crown was struck for William IV, although there are patterns. While the first coinage of George V omitted the denomination, public clamor caused it to be issued in the somewhat debased coinage of 1927. For Edward VIII there exist no coins, the last regnal break in the series; however, in 1935 there had appeared a silver crown celebrating the Silver Jubilee of George V, the only English commemorative coin.

Overseas, we find only three examples. First is the "Portoulis Crown" of Elizabeth, part of an issue bearing that emblem of the Tudor family, and designed as a sort of trade money for use in trade with India. George V, in the first issue of coins for New Zealand, struck a crown which is commemorative of the Treaty of Waitangi between the white settlers and the native Maoris; and finally, the crown is included in the silver coinage of George VI, for Australia. It is curious that this coin, and the English crown of George V (1927) are almost the only pieces in the whole series which show a crown as the principal device.

In addition to those mentioned, one must add that there exist a great many pattern crowns, struck both officially and privately, and in a variety of metals. Many of these are of great beauty, and some of very considerable rarity.

That this is the end of the story we may well doubt. On the first of the next month, the English coinage will be struck of cupra-nickel, and there will be no silver coinage, excepting possibly Maundy Money. The proposed issue will not include a crown, but already in Parliamentary Committee an agitation for a crown piece was excused by the Government solely on the ground of present over-work in the Mint. The cupra-nickel crown, when and if issued, will represent only another step in a numismatic history which extends over some four centuries; and the crown will continue as one of England's oldest coins, exceeded only by the penny, groat, and shilling.